

## Careers England Policy Commentary 25

*This is the twenty-fifth in an occasional series of briefing notes on key policy documents related to the future of career guidance services in England. The note has been prepared for Careers England by Professor Tony Watts.<sup>1</sup>*

### Responses by the Secretary of State for Education to the Education Select Committee

#### A.G. Watts

1. Michael Gove, the Secretary of State for Education, appeared before the Education Select Committee on 18 December 2013, to answer questions from Committee members related to various aspects of education policy, including careers guidance. It was the first time his views on careers guidance have been expressed in the public domain. This analysis of his comments is based on the uncorrected transcript<sup>2</sup>, which the Secretary of State will have an opportunity to correct. The transcript is therefore not yet an approved formal record of the proceedings.

2. It is unusual, and may be unprecedented, for a Secretary of State to make public such personal views about careers guidance. That the holder of such a high office of state holds the views he evidently does, and is prepared to make them public in the way he has, is a cause for grave concern.

3. Seven main points were made by the Secretary of State in the course of the session.

4. The first is that in his view the key to effective careers support, alongside curriculum reforms designed to avoid ‘premature specialisation’, is **direct contact between schools and employers**:

‘... people – teachers, parents and young people – need to develop a clearer sense of what the world of work offers and demands. I think that is best communicated by improving links between business or other employers and schools, because nothing is more inspiring or helpful than hearing from individuals in a particular area about the opportunities that they have to offer’ (p.13).

Accordingly, the key action required is:

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<sup>1</sup> Helpful comments from Paul Chubb and Dr Tristram Hooley on an earlier draft of this Policy Commentary are gratefully acknowledged. The author is however solely responsible for the views expressed.

<sup>2</sup> House of Commons Education Committee (2013). *Oral Evidence Taken before the Education Committee*. Uncorrected transcript of oral evidence. To be published as HC 859.

‘... to get business and, indeed, other employers in front of young people to inspire them’ (p.19).

The emphasis here is on students listening passively to talks; no reference is made to more active, engaging ways of involving employers in schools. Such talks (‘inspiration’) are also viewed as the key source of ‘advice’:

‘Nothing is more likely, for example, to encourage someone to pursue science than knowing that the range of career options available to you is infinitely greater if you are doing physical sciences and mathematics than if you have chosen prematurely to specialise in other areas’ (p.13).

In the Secretary of State’s view, it seems, such advice can be provided satisfactorily by any single employer (with a specific perspective likely to be related to its own distinctive needs), with no need for more detailed complementary contributions from careers advisers utilising their distinctive professional skills and knowledge<sup>3</sup>, including their wider view of the labour market. No evidence or reasoned argument is offered in support of this vacuous assertion.

5. Secondly, and stemming from this view, the Secretary of State apparently sees **careers advisers as redundant**:

‘It is certainly the case that we should do more to engage employers with schools and vice versa. What I emphatically do not believe is that we need a cadre of careers advisers to operate in between those two’ (p.19).

This confirms but also states explicitly what has been implicit in recent policy statements by the relevant junior Minister (serving under the Secretaries of State both for Education and for Business, Innovation and Skills), Matthew Hancock.<sup>4</sup> Michael Gove elaborates the point:

‘I think that the failure of this country in the past to ensure that young people are provided with a sufficiently wide range of opportunities comes down to our failure to ensure that they are literate, numerate and confident in subjects like science, not that we have had an insufficient number of well-paid [sic] careers advisers’ (p.18).

He sets up an idealised view of the role:

‘I am sceptical about the capacity of careers advisers, given the record we have seen in the past, to have all the knowledge required. What do we expect of them? Do we expect them to have perfect knowledge of the local labour market? Do we

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<sup>3</sup> Often based on qualifications at QCF Level 6 (postgraduate level).

<sup>4</sup> See Watts, A.G. (2013). *Government Inspiration Vision Statement and Other Recent Developments*. Careers England Policy Commentary 24.

expect them to have an understanding of the psychology and motivation of the individual student? Do we expect them to be able to detect employment trends five, 10 or 15 years out in order to offer that advice? If we do, then we expect them to be supermen and superwomen' (p.19).

He then appears to infer that because careers advisers cannot be such 'supermen and superwomen', they should not be made available at all: a remarkable *non sequitur* (see para.10 below for an analysis of the logical fallacy being deployed here). There is also no reference in this part of the discussion to the professional role of careers educators: trained and experienced professional teachers who lead, manage, provide and support careers programmes for students<sup>5</sup>, so ensuring that contributions of employers are managed in a way that maximises benefits to students. It is unclear whether the Secretary of State's strictures apply to this complementary professional role, or whether he is even aware of it.

6. Third, **evidence provided by the careers sector is viewed as self-interested and lacking 'intellectual rigour'**. The exchange here is worth quoting in full:

**Michael Gove:** I believe in deploying intellectual rigour to analyse the problem, that there is lot of garbage talked about careers –

**Mr Ward:** Including the Select Committee's report?

**Michael Gove:** – from some self-interested sources, but there is now clarity and responsibility. Not the first time, we inherited a situation that was totally inadequate and we are making improvements.

**Mr Ward:** So is the Select Committee's own report part of that garbage?

**Michael Gove:** No, but there are some people who have populated the debate who I think are not deploying the degree of rigour that is required and who are self-interested.

**Chair:** Who are you talking about? I have not the faintest idea of who you are talking about, honestly.

**Alex Cunningham:** Names, names.

**Ian Mearns:** Secretary of State –

**Chair:** Wait, Ian. Secretary of State, you have said that the debate is being clouded by self-interested people, unnamed, and I do not know who these people are.

**Michael Gove:** I think I have probably said enough.  
(p.16)

The vague nature of these abusive allegations, and the refusal to substantiate them, are both worthy of note.

7. Fourth, the Secretary of State **denies that there has been any reduction in the extent and quality of careers provision**. In this part of the discussion, he adopts three

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<sup>5</sup> So building careers education into students' daily experiences and laying the foundations for the bespoke career guidance support provided by careers advisers. See Careers Profession Task Force (2010). *Towards a Strong Careers Profession*, p.25. London: Department for Education.

distinct positions. At times he claims that the quality of careers provision has already improved:

‘It is the case that the situation is improving, and it is the case ... that people are making better decisions about the qualifications that they should pursue’ (p.15).

At other times, when presented with references to evidence from the Select Committee itself and from Ofsted<sup>6</sup> and other sources, he shifts to the future tense:

‘I believe that things will improve as a result of the changes’ (p.14).

Then, finally, he tortuously seems to rest his argument on the lack of a desire to return to Connexions:

**Michael Gove:** What was better beforehand? No one has proven it and it is not there in the report. It is the case that the situation is improving, and it is the case, as I mentioned earlier, that people are making better decisions about the qualifications that they should pursue. If people think that we should reconstruct Connexions –

**Chair:** Nobody says that.

**Michael Gove:** In that case, the situation is clearly better, because we would not want to go back to the status quo ante. If you do not want to go back to the situation beforehand, then it clearly was a worse situation, and it is clearly better now. That is not faith, that is logic.

**Chair:** We will not examine the logic.  
(p.15)

It would be interesting to know whether the Secretary of State would view his statements on this issue as reflecting the ‘intellectual rigour’ he espouses (see para.6 above).

8. Fifth, he indicates that **impartiality of career guidance is not viewed as a matter of concern**. He starts by conceding that there could be a *bit* of an issue here:

**Ian Mearns:** ... Is there not a real danger that the independence and impartiality of careers advice has gone out of the window, because schools are giving that advice and guidance to young people themselves, and are often hoping to retain those youngsters in their own institution?

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<sup>6</sup> The Secretary of State asserts that ‘there is no evidence that the situation is worse than it was beforehand’ (p.15). In direct contradiction to this statement, evidence from Ofsted is clear not only on the deficiencies of current provision in the great majority of schools, but also on the recent deterioration that has taken place, particularly in the proportion of individual interviews by an external careers guidance professional and also in their work-experience provision for students in years 10-11. Ofsted (2013). *Going in the Right Direction? Careers Guidance in Schools from September 2012*. For a detailed analysis, see Watts, A.G. (2013). *Ofsted Thematic Review and Government Action Plan*. Careers England Policy Commentary 23. Of course, if Michael Gove does not regard these as components of good careers provision, and if the sole criterion is ‘inspirational talks’ from employers, such findings can be dismissed.

**Michael Gove:** ... I know that there are one or two cases where that occurs. I know that there have been individual schools that have not advertised to their students the full range of post-16 options with the vigour that all of us would want – true – but the way in which schools are being held to account more energetically for the decisions that they make by this Department means that that will change, and is changing.  
(pp.16-17)

He refers in particular to destination measures in this respect:

‘If a school takes the short-sighted view that someone should stay on in the sixth form to be one of those bums on those seats, and the courses are not in their interests, that will show up in the fact that that person will not go on to the sort of destination that they would want’ (p.17).

Quite *how* this would ‘show up’ in the statistics is unclear. In addition, however, the Secretary of State later indicates clearly that he does not see impartial access to information, advice and guidance on other options, including local colleges and apprenticeships, as an issue that requires attention (despite the significant attention given to it in the Ofsted review):

**Chair:** If ... you are seeing institutions that are struggling to fill their places using their position as the sole arbiter of information, advice and guidance to direct people to stay on and keep their sixth form going and you say to me, “Is that potentially a disaster?”, I will say, “Yes, it is,” because if they are not told about the other options, including sixth-form colleges and other providers, it is absolutely cheating the child of the best possible outcomes. It goes against the central tenet of your time in office, which is to raise standards for all.

**Michael Gove:** Everything you describe, in a perfect world – that is not the biggest concern in education; let’s get real. The biggest problem is attainment at the age of 16. The biggest inhibitor on people’s subsequent choices is not a conspiracy of head teachers determined to keep children imprisoned in sixth forms when they could be doing something else. The biggest problem is the quality of education that children have up until that point. If they’ve got the right qualifications at the age of 16, those choices are available to them. The idea that children are not aware of apprenticeships when there is a huge excess of demand over supply for apprenticeship places is a misnomer’ (p.18).

9. Sixth, the Secretary of State indicates that in his view **there is no need for a school careers plan or even a policy:**

‘Writing an annual plan or having a policy is, in my view, bureaucracy. The critical thing is: are you being held to account for the outcomes, rather than for the beauty and elegance of the policy that you write or construct? I think that the fact that schools are going to be inspected for the quality of the careers guidance that they provide will concentrate their minds. I can understand why asking someone

to write a policy is a tool to concentrate their mind. I think that knowing that you are going to be inspected on it is more likely to concentrate your mind. I appreciate entirely that the intention behind what the Committee proposed was to force that greater concentration of minds, but I think that it is happening anyway' (p.17).

Whether Ofsted will have the time or competence to inspect careers provision adequately is open to question. But leaving this aside, why inspection and having a plan/policy are regarded as alternatives rather than as complementary is unclear. It would also be interesting to know to what other activities the Secretary of State would extend the notion that 'writing an annual plan or having a policy is ... bureaucracy'. Does it apply to School Development Plans (which schools are required to provide, linked to the Ofsted framework)? To Government more generally?

10. Finally, the Secretary of State refers to the **lack of any models from the past or from other countries from which relevant lessons could be learned**:

'...no one has put forward a working example from either the past or another country that we should adopt. If anyone can, I would love to see it' (p.19).

In support of this statement, he deploys his familiar tactic (see also para.4 above) of rejecting relevant options by comparing them with unrealistic, idealised alternatives:

'I cannot think of any time in the history of this country when we got advice and guidance to young people right; and no one has yet shown me an alternative international model where they get all of these things right' (p.12).

This is described in philosophy as the nirvana fallacy: by creating a false dichotomy that presents one option which is obviously advantageous, while at the same time being completely implausible, a person using this fallacy can attack any alternative idea because it is imperfect. Through such fallacious reasoning, the Secretary of State is able to reject or ignore the huge volumes of relevant studies that have been conducted over many years. In particular, he seems unaware of, or unwilling to pay attention to, recent analyses of relevant research in the UK<sup>7</sup> and internationally<sup>8</sup> – the latter of which, based heavily on authoritative OECD studies, was expressly prepared for his own Department. If the Secretary of State wants a particular period in England's recent history to focus upon, then the partnership between the schools and the Careers Service in the mid-1990s would be much

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<sup>7</sup> See e.g. Hooley, T., Marriott, J., Watts, A.G. & Coiffait, L. (2012). *Careers 2020: Options for Future Careers Work in English Schools*. London: Pearson Think Tank with the International Centre for Guidance Studies, University of Derby.

<sup>8</sup> Watts, A.G. (2011). *The Proposed Model for Career Guidance in England: Some Lessons from International Examples*. A paper prepared for the Department for Education and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. *Inter alia*, this paper demonstrates that no high-performing country is pursuing policies that bear any resemblance to the deprofessionalised policies that the Secretary of State evidently favours.

more worthy of examination than the Connexions era.<sup>9</sup> If he wants a particular country to focus on, Finland would be a good country to choose: a high-performing country in all relevant international league tables, it has a highly professional career guidance system, with strong policies to support it.<sup>10</sup>

11. **Commentary.** The statements by the Secretary of State represent a major attack on all that has been achieved in developing better careers provision for young people in England over the last fifty years. They help to explain the attitudes that have driven public policy in this field since the current Government came to power. In its early days, John Hayes (the responsible Minister at the time) gave an inspirational speech in which he indicated the Government's intention to create a new all-age careers service which would build on the best of Connexions (for young people) and Next Step (for adults), and to revitalise the careers profession.<sup>11</sup> He subsequently stated:

‘I want the careers profession to return to a position of public recognition, prestige and value where guidance is seen as an essential part of life and experience. It is too important for us to do anything other.’<sup>12</sup>

John Hayes' vision was subsequently thwarted by the refusal of the Department for Education to play its role in delivering it. It was widely known that the Secretary of State's personal views were significant in determining this refusal. But until now these views have not been expressed in public.

12. Now they have. It is clear that they are based not on any serious rationale, but on a series of ignorant prejudices. The Secretary of State rejects contributions from the careers sector on the grounds that it is motivated solely by self-interest, with no recognition of or respect for the fact that it comprises many individuals who have devoted their professional working lives to helping young people and many organisations that represent education, employers and the community in broader ways. He also rejects the huge body of relevant research and evidence on the grounds that it lacks ‘intellectual rigour’. Intellectual rigour is based on evidence and reasoned argument. Both are conspicuously absent from the statements made by the Secretary of State to the Education Select Committee.

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<sup>9</sup> See Peck, D. (2004). *Careers Services: History, Policy and Practice in the United Kingdom*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.

<sup>10</sup> See Careers England Policy Briefing Note 6.

<sup>11</sup> John Hayes in speech to Institute of Career Guidance Annual Conference, Belfast, 4 November 2010.

<sup>12</sup> John Hayes in 13<sup>th</sup> Annual Lecture, International Centre for Guidance Studies, University of Derby, 16 June 2011. Linked to this statement, the recommendations of the Careers Profession Task Force (see footnote 5) were accepted in full by the Coalition Government, and a lot of work has been done by the careers profession and other parts of the careers sector, much of it on a voluntary basis, to implement them. This work was done on trust, now betrayed.